

TAKING NOTES IN DEBATES

LEARNING GOALS

1. To apply listening skills.
2. To effectively take notes in a debate.
3. To utilize debate notes as a tool for evaluating argumentation during a debate.
4. To utilize debate notes as a tool for evaluating argumentation after a debate.

INTRODUCTION

Debate is about the give and take of arguments. As arguments are made, they relate to each other in a variety of ways. Good note-taking abilities are essential for success in debate. If you are able to track how arguments relate to each other, you will be able to compare and contrast the balance of arguments.

The system of notes used to take notes in a debate is called “flowing.” It’s called “flowing” because arguments flow across the page as they relate to each other. Taking notes in this format provides a map of the debate and shows what was said and by whom. Flowing also allows you to plan specific attacks on your opponent’s arguments, and organizes your thoughts for your speeches. You make a flow by taking notes of each speech in a column.

Do not try to write down every word your opponent says. Try to capture only the major ideas and arguments of your opponent. It will be important to use symbols and abbreviations to help you take more efficient notes.

Normally, there are two sides in a debate. One side makes a case for the motion for debate (they *propose* the motion, for example), while the other side argues against that case (they *oppose* the motion). The two sides alternate speeches as the debate progresses. This process is graphically represented in a debater’s notes. Here’s an example of a bad debate:

Proposing side	Opposing Side	Proposing Side	Opposing Side	Proposing Side
YES	→ NO	→ YES	→ NO	→ YES

Why is this an example of a bad debate? The example “debaters” are not making arguments, and just saying “Yes” and “No.” In this sample of note-taking, you can see that arrows are used to show how arguments relate to each other in a debate.

PRACTICAL HINTS FOR FLOWING

1. Shorten each word to 1-2 syllables.
2. Eliminate vowels when abbreviating.
3. Use the minimum number of notations, but make sure you can understand what you have written.
4. Use lines and arrows to connect arguments for both debaters.

ACTIVITY: FUN WITH LISTS

Procedure:

Have students prepare to take notes. Explain that you will read a series of lists to them and that they should try to write down as many of the list items as they can. Begin with the simpler lists, on the left, and proceed to the more complex lists on the right. After each list, stop and ask students to repeat back the items on the list in order.

List 1	List 2	List 3	List 4	List 5
5	Toyota	Orange	Tom Brokaw	George Bush
64	Honda	Suburban	Diane Sawyer	Volvo
578	Kia	12	Dan Rather	27
2	Ferrari	Friends	Peter Jennings	Cabbage
99	Mitsubishi	Internet	Regis Philbin	Halloween
1,023	Chevrolet	56	Bill O'Reilly	Cheerios
73	Mercedes-Benz	Acura	Leslie Stahl	882
5,598	Ford	Yellow	Wolf Blitzer	Rottweiler
	Cadillac			Eagle

Tips for the Taskmaster:

Gradually increase your speed as you progress from list to list. Develop lists of your own, with more diverse and longer content. One suggestion is to prepare lists of assertions on a given topic and have students write down all of the assertions in order. This will help them prepare for taking notes in a debate. For example, you might read the following list to students, saying the numbers out loud:

1. Education policy should be reformed.
2. There are no problems in our schools today.
3. Students have too much homework.
4. Teachers really care about students.
5. Schools should require students to learn a foreign language.

These sorts of lists are helpful as teaching tools because you can ask students to show which of the statements contradict each other and how the statements could be revised to make them consistent. You can also ask students to make each assertion into a complete argument.

ACTIVITY: NOW YOU'RE COOKING

Materials:

One or more cookbooks, preferably books that contain recipes using ingredients with which the students will not be familiar. Scan the books ahead of time to identify a few recipes that you will read to the students.

Procedure:

Have students prepare to take notes. Explain to students that you will be reading them a recipe and that they should try to write down all of the ingredients.

Read the students a recipe. You will not have to read the baking or cooking instructions, although you can if you wish. Here's an ingredient list for Aloo Gosht, which is a good list because it uses metric measurements and some ingredients with which students may not be familiar:

Aloo-Gosht

Ingredients

1 kilo lamb/goat/beef meat
500 gm. small potatoes
1 big onion thinly sliced
1 big onion paste
75 gm. natural yoghurt
2 tea spoon coriander powder
1 tea spoon cumin
1 1/2 teaspoon chilli powder
150 gm. ghee or oil
2 teaspoon ginger paste
2 teaspoon garlic paste
1 bay leaf
1 teaspoon turmeric
garam masala made of 3 black cardamom, 1 inch Cinnamon, 4 cloves, 5 green cardamom, 12 black paper.
salt 1 or 2 teaspoon

Tips for the Taskmaster

After you read the recipe, have each student read their list aloud. Keep track of their mistakes without correcting their presentation. After all students have presented their list, read the correct list. You might want to announce the name of the student whose list was closest to the original list.

ACTIVITY: PLAYING CARDS

Materials:

- A deck of standard playing cards
- Prepared flow sheets for the students (or have students make their own)
- One experienced student to serve as scribe (or serve as your own scribe as you read)

Procedure:

This exercise teaches students how to flow in debates using playing cards rather than actual arguments. Students will need to have a prepared flow sheet divided into columns. The sheet could look like this:

First Proposing	First Opposing	Second Proposing	Second Opposing

Shuffle the cards. Explain to the students that you will begin with the arguments made by an imaginary first speaker for the proposing side. The students should write down each argument, which will be represented by a playing card. Emphasize to the students that they must **space out** the individual arguments on their page, leaving space between each argument so they can effectively track the responses.

Begin with the first speaker’s arguments. Pull four cards from the deck and number them, i.e., “My first argument is the Jack of Hearts. My second argument is the four of spades. My third argument is the seven of diamonds. My fourth argument is the King of Diamonds.” Many students will not use appropriate abbreviations for these first cards, so you might want to go over the flowsheet to make sure students are using an effective abbreviation system.

Next, you should deliver the first opposing speaker’s arguments. You should be creative, and make sure you use relational references to illustrate the clash of arguments. As students get more advanced, you can increase your use of terms used in formal debates, like “turn” and “impact.” Here’s an example speech and the corresponding flow sheet:

“They say ‘Jack of Hearts.’ First, that’s not true because of the eight of clubs. Second, Queen of Diamonds. Now, they say ‘four of spades.’ My first answer is two of hearts. Second, the Ace of Spades disproves that argument. Their third argument is the seven of diamonds. However, this seven of diamonds argument proves our side. Also, nine of hearts. Their final argument is the King of Diamonds. But I’ve already answered this with

the Queen of Diamonds. Second, five of diamonds. Third, two of spades.”

First Proposing	First Opposing	Second Proposing	Second Opposing
1. JH →	1. Not true: 8C 2. QD		
2. 4S →	1. 2H 2. AS disproves		
3. 7D →	1. 7D proves our side 2. 9H		
4. KD →	1. Ans. By QD 2. 5D 3. 2S		

Many of the students will be lost at this point, so you should have your scribe (or you) read over the master flow sheet so students can make corrections to their flowsheets. Then you can deliver the third speech to demonstrate how argument extension works. Here’s another sample speech and the corresponding flowsheet:

“Extend our first argument, the Jack of Hearts. First, the eight of clubs contradicts the Queen of Diamonds. Second, four of clubs. Now, on our second argument. We said four of spades. They say two of hearts and ace of spades, but the four of spades is more recent than the two of hearts. Also, there’s no evidence for the ace of spades. On our third point. We said seven of diamonds. They said this proves their side, but they’re wrong – it proves our side because Ace of Diamonds. Finally, extend our argument about the King of Diamonds. This is more important than their point. Also, the five of diamonds and the two of spades are empirically wrong. The seven of clubs proves this.

Middle School Public Debate Program
Claremont Colleges Debate Outreach – kate.shuster@claremontmckenna.edu

First Proposing	First Opposing	Second Proposing	Second Opposing
1. JH →	1. Not true: 8C 2. QD	Extend JH. 1. 8C contradicts QD 2. 4C	
2. 4S →	1. 2H 2. AS disproves	1. 4S is more recent than 2H 2. no ev for AS	
3. 7D →	1. 7D proves our side 2. 9H	7D actually proves our side: AD.	
4. KD →	1. Ans. By QD 2. 5D 3. 2S	1. Extend KD. Outweighs theirs. 2. 5D and 2S empirically wrong: 7C.	

You can continue the exercise, but this is usually enough for beginning students. Explain to students that this process shows how arguments are made and relate to each other in debates. Tell them that the cards only stand in for arguments, and in debates they will have to track real arguments and how they relate to each other.